

Lessons for Multi-Issue Organizing:

From the Women's Movement to Struggles for Global Justice

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ABSTRACT

Over the last five decades, the Women's Movement has become intimately connected with broad-based universalizing discourses based on human rights and multi-issue organizing. This brand of organizing is represented by both innovative organizing repertoires, and willingness by cohort after cohort of women to take leadership roles in broad-based campaigns for social change. Notable examples of women's leadership can be found in: the Civil Rights, Gay Liberation, Transgender, Reproductive Rights, AIDS, Harm Reduction, and Global Justice Movements. Concepts from feminist organizing, including prefigurative community building are explored. A closer look at contributions of women to organizing efforts provides a richer, fuller, more complete understanding of the field and practice.

**KEY WORDS:** *prefigurative community organizing, ACT UP, social movements, direct action, multi issue organizing, Ella Baker model*

In the years before Barack Obama's election, countless observers suggested that community organizing was an obsolete method. Afterall, traditional histories and teaching texts on community organizing tend to treat the practice as if it were a relic of the past, while generally highlighting the importance of mostly male leaders (Alinsky,

1946; Chambers, 2003; Davids, 2007; Netting, Kettner, & McMurtry 2004). Over and over, organizing education offers little more than a recitation of the “golden oldies” of the victories from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1960s (Shepard & Hayduck, 2002). As result, it frequently underemphasizes the contribution of women in a wide range of movements from civil rights to global justice.

Yet, there is a different story of organizing--that community organizing has been a continual activity on the political landscape in the U.S. since the 1960s, and in fact is probably the predominant model of activists on the left (and to some extent the right) (see Taylor, 2005). While a handful of women organizers have been celebrated for their contributions, many more women have been the backbone of myriad community organizing activities since the mid-1960s.

In fact, many informally suggest that if there are no women in the room, the work of organizers is doomed to fail. Today, this is the conventional wisdom among many organizers. Barbara Epstein (2001) has argued that the Women’s Movement has become a demobilized idea, not a movement, yet its principles are woven into a wide range of organizing campaigns and movements. Women have led campaigns in which principles of U.S. feminism and justice are infused within broad-based universalizing discourses (Sedgwick, 1991). Such principles include direct democracy, prefigurative community building, and consensus-based organizing (see D’Emilio, 1993). The point of these principles is that the body of a movement is as important as the head; democracy should be bottom up, not town down. The process should be fair, transparent, and accountable, and the result organizers hope to create is best entwined within the organizing process, not in some elusive revolutionary future (Epstein, 1990; Starhawk, 2004). Through these

principles, activists hope to avert the means-ends inversion that frequently undermines movements and organizations for social change (Solnit, 2004).

In order for marginalized groups to have an impact, they benefit from fresh organizational repertoires (Clemens, 1993). Sociologist Elizabeth Clemens (1997) notes that women involved in campaigns for social change have long understood that “the ability to organize determined whose voices would be heard” (p. 43). The challenge is to figure out how innovations in community organization can actually result in desired changes. Fact and organizational form inform such dilemmas. The organizing principles in question--direct democracy, consensus based decision making, prefigurative, and multi-issue organizing--represent just a small handful of innovative organizational approaches that have come to inject vitality into social action (Clemens, 1997, p. 49). Throughout the years activists have sought to infuse such principles into a wide range of campaigns. When such practices become familiar they are understood as organizational repertoires. Innovations in such repertoires offer any number of benefits. “Initial advantages may flow from the capacity of new forms of organization to disrupt taken-for-granted procedures or form tactical innovations that new opportunities or help to mobilize new resources,” Clemens (1997, P. 44) elaborates. Yet, none of this means a thing without social actors to translate them into action.

The case narratives discussed in the following pages involve both innovative organizing repertoires, and a willingness by cohort after cohort of women to take leadership roles in broad-based campaigns for social change. Many extend beyond identity based movements into campaigns involving multiple complicated targets. Here, sociologists Lesley J. Wood and Kelly Moore (2002) suggest, “the expanded targets and

shifts in practices are due to the changing locus of political power, access to resources, and changes in policing,” (p. 22). Yet, there is more to it than this. "There's an understanding that these issues are tied up together," notes Laura McSpedon, a student anti-sweatshop organizer at Georgetown University, and "that to separate culture and identity and race and gender from class and the concerns of working people is artificial, and divides us in unproductive ways" (Shepard and Hayduck, 2002, p.18). In order to formulate a broad-based feminist model for multi-issue organizing, these leaders advance the understanding that power interfaces with multiple forms of oppression.

"Oppression is like a large tree with many branches. Each branch being a part of the whole. They cannot be separated; they draw from each other," Lois Hart, one of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) founders, explained during the group's heyday in 1969 (Teal, 1971, p.88). On the thirtieth anniversary of Gay Liberation Front in 1999, I started reading about the group and the vision of multi-issue organizing that inspired many of the women and men in the more militant branch of the movement. In order to better understand this complicated history, I started to conduct long interviews (McCracken, 1988) with those involved with both Gay Liberation and the movements that followed. In the years which followed I built a snowball sample of male and female organizers for social change in both New York and around the country. Many suggested I read this or that book or article, or go to this demonstration. Once there, I often ran into others with similar sentiments. What took shape within their stories was a series of counter narratives that represented a kind of alternate history of organizing. The following considers examples of women's leadership in multi-issue campaigns from Social Work, Welfare Rights, Civil Rights, Gay Liberation, Transgender, Reproductive Rights, AIDS, Harm

Reduction, and Global Justice movements. It considers the ideas of feminist organizing, leadership, its history and its influence on larger movements, as well as its ongoing evolution.

## WOMEN, SOCIAL WORK, AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Social welfare advocacy has long been championed by women. Jane Addams (1910/1998) led organizing campaigns for housing, child welfare, and labor laws as a leader within the Settlement House Movement. Bertha Cappen Reynolds (1963) fought to link the struggles between social work and labor. Frances Fox Piven played a central role in founding the National Welfare Rights Movement (Piven & Cloward, 1993). And Mimi Abramovitz (1996) helped organize women on public assistance to become advocates. Through her 2002-3 “Community Leadership” class, Hunter College social work students helped draft public welfare rules calling for greater access to education for those on public assistance, which found support in the New York City Council (Arenson, 2003).

Unfortunately, the social work field has not always valued these contributions. Jane Addams’ influence on the field waned when she spoke up against the First World War (Elshtain, 2001). Reynolds was terminated from her position at the Smith School of Psychiatric Social Work in 1938 after disputes over her efforts to link social work with trade union advocacy and a Marxist critique (Reisch & Andrews, 2002). Similarly, Fox-Piven left social work education when Columbia University failed to promote her after her public role in the student sit-ins at the university during the late 1960s (Miller, 2002).

Over time their contributions to broader movements for social and economic justice have been better understood. Today, Reynolds is embraced by the NASW. “Social work is blessed to have as one of its early founders a person of deep and wide ranging

intellect, of compassion, and of independence and integrity,” the NASW Foundation (n.d.) website states. “Social work is shamed, as well, by its failure to stand up for this courageous and radical New England woman during conservative times,” it now laments. Addams, Piven, and Reynolds are one part of a long history of contributions of women to human rights and multi-issue organizing. Building on their efforts, women have intimately connected their organizing efforts with broad-based universalizing discourses that support notions of change in its deepest forms (Sedgwick, 1991).

While Addams helped propel the Settlement House Movement, Reynolds connected social work with trade unionism, and Fox-Piven helped organize the National Welfare Rights organization. Women have long cultivated and supported multi-issue, U.S. social movements. Yet the process was not simple. Organizers such as Ella Baker and Lucy Mason struggled against the deeply embedded cultural assumptions that leadership traits and masculinity overlapped. Rejecting conventional top-down models of leadership, these women developed leadership models that favored collaboration over hierarchy, humanistic rather than sectarian instincts, and a nurturing appreciation of the needs of the group, rather than doctrinaire adherence to the principles of any one charismatic leader (Glissen, 2000). Many pushed for a commitment for movement participants to value the soft and compassionate, as well as the hard and courageous, the lovers and healers as well as those willing to take risks, to appreciate the means as well as the ends, the internal process as well as the impact on the institutions movements oppose (Starhawk, 2004).

Such innovations in organization helped bring waves of new participants into movements (Clemmens, 1997; Glissen, 2000). Feminist organizer Starhawk (2004)

suggests that they make their movements richer in countless ways. “A movement which embraces feminist values becomes more alive, more creative--for patriarchy is inherently predictable, and boring,” Starhawk contends (2004, p.50). “It spawns the ‘tactical frivolity’ of the Pink Block snake dancing through police lines to the Congress Center in Prague, and the magic of the Pagan cluster taking over Grand Central Station in New York with an impromptu spiral dance” (p.50). These principles help organizers find their full potential, “for action and compassion, for fighting for and loving. It embodies the world we want to create: a world where we can all be whole,” Starhawk concludes (p. 50). There is much to learn about the history of political organizing in general, and feminist organizing specifically. Many of the most influential organizers of the last fifty years have been women. Their influence can be traced through a series of overlapping movements dating back to the Civil Rights era. Yet the route they took was often highly spontaneous, creative, and intuitive from issue to issue.

From the civil rights and gay liberation movements, the birth of the AIDS Coalition, Unleash Power (ACT UP) in 1987, the Seattle World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in 1999 to the contemporary global peace and justice movements, activists have built on the lessons of the women’s movement and its emphasis on consensus-based organizing (Kauffman, 2002). This radical renewal drew upon a distinct set of bottom-up organizing principles brought to the Civil Rights Movement by Ella Baker (Ransby, 2003). Over the decades, countless social movements adopted the lessons of “peoplist” organizers such as Baker (Crass, 2004).

Utilizing many of the same organizing principles, movements that were initially considered separate from each other and larger issues of social change were all linked

within a direct lineage of activism. “[T]hese movements profoundly influenced both each other and the larger radical project and, across decades of political experimentation, created the new vernacular of resistance that has been showcased in the global justice movement of today” radical historian L. A. Kauffman writes (2002, pp.35-6). Kauffman contends that, “The single most influential group of people in this thirty-year process of innovation and reinvigoration were lesbian activists, both white and of color, who most often formed the bridges between one movement and the next, transmitting skills, insight, and expertise” (2002, p.35-6). Lesbian activists brought with them a fierce commitment to consensus-based organizing, an abiding adherence to notions of justice and freedom, and a willingness to put their bodies on the line--even if it meant spending a night, or many nights, in jail.

Students of the history of social movements would do well to consider some of the lessons of their stories. “From Palestine to global AIDS activism, women have taken the lead in making these movements work,” noted long-time New York activist Steve Questor (personal communication, 2008). “Who’s doing the work?” Questor noted. While few activists today are interested in “essentialist” politics, in which one camp is viewed as inferior or superior to another, such a rejection of identity politics does not mean that the contributions of specific groups of organizers should remain obscured. Notions of freedom of thought, of debate, of desire, and of the body from state control are all feminist principles that remain a vital part of current organizing strategies for personal and societal freedom. Today, these principles can help multi-issue, multi-gender, direct democratic organizing take shape. There are few more influential organizing narratives than the story of Ella Baker.



## ELLA BAKER AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

While Martin Luther King is often perceived as the spiritual leader of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, many others helped King and the movement do what it did (D’Emilio, 2004). Notable examples include Fanny Lou Hammer, who put her life on the line to help get black people the right to vote: Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, who helped do the logistical work for the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which helped propel the Civil Rights Movement, and many others (Payne, 1995; Robinson, 1987). Perhaps no other leaders were more important in this process than Ella Baker, who suggested that King link the movement with the work of grassroots student organizers, such as those involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC). Baker, the long time field secretary of the NAACP, understood that such an alliance could propel the movement forward in ways no single leader could do (Payne, 1995).

Baker was deeply opposed to the charismatic model of leadership, which paid a premium for the leadership of an individual rather than a collective. Her point was that leadership was an abundant quality, best cultivated within the body of a movement, not its head. Leadership was something everyone had in them. Thus, movements were best served when organizations looked to themselves, and identified and cultivated leadership from within, rather than from the outside (Ransby, 2003).

The Ella Baker Model is best understood as a framework for group centered leadership. “My basic sense of it has always been to get people to understand that in the long run, they themselves are the only protection they have against violence and injustice,” Baker explained (quoted in Crass, 2004, p. 430). For Baker, activism was about the work of regular people rather than that of any one leader, however charismatic

he or she might be. “People have to be made to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but themselves,” she noted (p. 430). The Baker Model built on three core components: (1) an appreciation for bottom up leadership development and decision making, especially with decisions that affect people’s lives, (2) the reduction of hierarchy or emphasis on professionalism in leadership, and (3) a call for direct action as an antidote to fear, disempowerment, alienation or disengagement (Crass, 2004).

In order for people to become movement leaders and put their passion into the struggle, the movements in which they worked had to reflect their individual needs. For King to learn as a follower as well as a leader, he had to trust and listen to the counsel of individuals such as Baker and Bayard Rustin, while learning to be part of a network of collective leadership (Johnson, 2001). Baker’s opposition to the charismatic leadership model favored by civil rights organizations such as NAACP and SCLC, put her at odds with their male leadership (Ransby, 2003). Many of the same forces opposed Rustin’s contribution, on the grounds that he was homosexual (D’Emilio, 2004). Despite the obstacles to the democratic nature of the Baker Model (sexism and homophobia), both leaders had long-term impacts on their movement and those that followed.

A central theme of the Ella Baker Model of organizing and community building is the recognition that *how* organizers create a new world is just as important as the society they create. The means and the ends could not be separated. There was little point in creating a new society that replaced racial apartheid with another mechanism of oppression. The process of organizing was as important as the final results. One could not be separated from the other. Community building was a central piece of this model, serving both instrumental and external aims, means, and ends. It helped hold the

movement together by allowing it to reach both short-term and long-term ends. Historian Charles Payne (1995) notes that “a deep sense of community was itself an act of resistance” (p. 405). At its core, the Baker Model helped organizers redefine movement success in terms of social interaction and the development of healthy human relationships, not just external goals achieved, laws passed, voters registered. In so doing, the Baker Model offered an outline for a different kind of freedom, which supported both individual and collective aspirations (Glissen, 2000).

Activists have come to describe such notions of building a new world within the shell of the old as “prefigurative” community organizing. This idea has been profoundly important for generations of organizers. This organizational repertoire has been adopted in movement after movement--from anti-nukes (Epstein, 1990), to the environment (Starhawk, 2002), to today’s battles over global justice (Clemens, 1997). Organizer David Solnit’s 2004 anthology on the global justice movement, *Globalize Liberation*, specifically highlights the lessons of Baker's advocacy for non-authoritarian, non-hierarchical organizing approaches (Crass, 2004). Building on her work, Solnit notes that a primary ambition of the global justice movement is to get the process right, and thereby to avoid the slow route toward authoritarianism that overwhelmed so many 20<sup>th</sup> century social movements. Power corrupts absolutely, regardless of who is in charge. Thus, what the community activists create is best reflected within the efforts to create it. Without such thinking, struggles for a more egalitarian world lose their efficacy. To avoid such pitfalls, many in the new movements work toward fostering a spirit of creative experimentation, in which openness and respect for difference is a given. Here activists aim to articulate and embody their new approaches to social change. “Without a creative

break from these patterns,” Solnit (2004) explains, “we doom ourselves to stagnant movements, another generation of disheartened radicals, and a world unchanged,” (p. xiv). “Process counts” is a theme we owe to organizers such as Baker who helped make the idea real. After all, what happens on the streets, patterns of friendship, and the details of daily interaction are essential sources for social inquiry and engagement. Following the 1960s, many in the women’s movement sought to resist patriarchal habits, and to find ways for women who may have never heard their own voices start to speak. In the years to follow, countless movements struggled to cultivate a process of respectful, open democratic exchange, in which oppressive systems were rejected in favor of egalitarian engagement and playful creativity (Shepard, 2009; in press).

For many, Baker’s life story is the active embodiment of such politics. Her lesson that an oppressed group could transform the conditions of their lives was profoundly inspiring for a nascent movement taking steam during the late 1960s--gay liberation (D’Emilio, 2004; Payne, 1995). For many involved, the implicit values of equality, truth, and non-violence, which characterized the movement, could be understood lessons for everyone. And principles of the Baker model continued. As civil rights overlapped with gay rights, the opportunities (for human liberation) and barriers (patriarchy) seemed to mirror each other (Berube, 2001).

## GAY LIBERATION AND LGBT ORGANIZING

Out of the Civil Rights Movement, a different movement for freedom gained steam with the same spirit of defiant direct action that had characterized the civil rights years and Baker Model. In 1966, after one too many insults from the police, a group of patrons at Gene Compton’s Cafeteria in San Francisco’s Tenderloin district finally fought

back. The patrons, mostly transgender women, street hustlers, and queer youth, responded by trashing the cafeteria and torching a police car parked outside. Following years of harassment, the Compton's riot helped radicalize the San Francisco queer community (Lee & Ettinger, 2006; Stryker & Kuskirk, 1996). In 1969, a similar riot outside the Stonewall Inn in New York's Greenwich Village helped push Gay Liberation into a national movement. One recent account of the riot notes that only after a lesbian escaped three times from a police wagon did the tone of the incident change from that of a routine police raid into a riot capable of transforming power relations (Carter, 2004).

New York's Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was born in the weeks after that incident. Yet prefiguring an egalitarian community remained a challenge for the nascent LGBT movement, just as it had for the Civil Rights Movement. GLF was structured as a radical organization that linked its struggle with those of the Black Power, Women's and Third World liberation movements. "What was incredible about the Gay Liberation Front. . . is that it saw itself as a multi-issue radical movement," writes Michael Bronski (2009). "It was as concerned with ending wars abroad, fighting racism and securing reproductive freedom for women as it was with fighting homophobia. Members. . . also understood that they needed, pragmatically and philosophically, to work in coalition with other movements." While the goal of overcoming all forms of oppression was ambitious, the practical route was elusive. Within a matter of months of the birth of the new organization, many walked out. "When the women left, most of the energy was gone," Kohler recalled (quoted in Teal, 1995, p. 139). "I felt abandoned. A lot of the energy was gone" (p. 139). The post-Stonewall experiment in multi-issue, anti-racist, pro-gay, pro-feminist organizing was a brief, exhausting, and exhilarating one. Yet, it established an

ambition for a movement, as well as a lasting legacy. Looking back, Karla Jay suggests, "there were neither villains, nor victors. There were no other models. So we did the best we could." The Gay Liberation movement and the struggle against patriarchal social arrangements it personified continued long after GLF faded into memory (Teal, 1995).

An early Gay Liberation group was the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) (transvestite was the original group name, though the recent revived group used the modern "trans"). STAR was organized by transgender women Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, who infused Gay Liberation with an authentic connection to the struggles of homeless youth and gender variant people who had little or no other voice. In the years to come, the LGBT movement would continue to grapple with the issues Rivera raised concerning the position of those on the margins: the poor, the oppressed, the outsiders. Throughout the years, transgender women, such as Rivera, developed a feminist praxis in which a struggle for personal freedom was embodied in both the most intimate aspects of their private lives and public struggles. At her death, Rivera was remembered as the "Grand Dame" of the movement (Shepard, 2004).

While the 1970s is often characterized as a time when gay men and lesbians co-existed within separate cultural camps, in fact queer men and women worked together to achieve some of the greatest successes of the period. Lesbian Anne Kronenberg, for example, managed Harvey Milk's successful campaign to become one of the nation's first openly gay elected officials in 1977. Lesbians, including Kronenberg, played key roles in the victory over the 1978 Briggs Initiative (Proposition 6), which sought to ban homosexuals from teaching in California public schools. "The forces that we figured would be against Proposition 6 were the gay movement and sections of the women's

movement, period,” explained Amber Hollibaugh, a lesbian and sexual civil liberties activist who campaigned across the state of California to defeat the initiative. “We did not assume support from anywhere else because no other groups had shown support,” (quoted in Hollibaugh, 2000, p.48). Hollibaugh brought a distinct understanding of the class dimensions behind the Briggs initiative, helping give voice to more moderate interests within the California body politic who were opposed to the encroachment of the religious right into public life. A brief consideration of Hollibaugh’s contribution to this campaign offers useful insight into female leadership in movement organizing.

On one occasion during the campaign, Hollibaugh debated a supporter of the initiative, Reverend Blue, who suggested that maybe Hitler was right about how to treat homosexuals. “I looked out at the audience, a big audience, with a lot of his congregation. The audience’s age was my parents’ age, in their fifties. Which meant that they were in World War II and would define themselves as antifascist.” And Hollibaugh saw a wedge. I said, “Well, you know Reverend Blue, my guess would be that many of the people in this audience fought against someone that had this kind of a position in World War II, and my guess is that this audience does not support genocide” (p.51). The audience soundly backed Hollibaugh, and the initiative was defeated later that year.

Through her involvement in the lesbian-feminist “sex wars” that followed in the late 1970s and 1980s, Hollibaugh also helped give voice to those who sought a different path toward personal and sexual freedom than had existed within previous social movements. “One of the most profound things about the Briggs Initiative is that it forced people to have to deal with sexual issues in a society that actively represses nonoppressive forms of sexual searching” Hollibaugh continued (2000, p.52). Yet with

Briggs, a new generation of queer activists was able to bring questions about sexuality and freedom into the public sphere for debate. It was a unique moment for a culture that “by and large does not encourage sexual debate on controversial issues,” Hollibaugh elaborated.. “It doesn’t do that around sexuality for women, and it certainly doesn’t do that around same-sex issues,” (p.52). Hollibaugh used her experience fighting the initiative to stake out a clear pro-sex, anti-censorship argument that benefited not only queers, but people of all sexualities in the years to come.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the ascent of the Christian Right became a catalyst for a generation of women who joined the women’s movement as organizers. One such woman, lesbian playwright Sarah Schulman (2002) described her entry:

My family was very homophobic. I was basically exorcized from home as a teenager. I dropped out of college. . . and I went to Europe. And I met people who were involved in helping women from Spain, which was still fascist at the time, go to France to get abortions. So I had hands-on, front-row experience of illegal abortion and how it operated. So when I came back here in 1979, the Hyde Amendment eliminated Medicaid abortion. And my friend and I just immediately went to CARASA [Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse]--it was the day of the Hyde Amendment--and got involved in the abortion rights movement. . . .Then of course, the next year, Reagan [was] elected. That just felt like a very immediate place. (p.134)

Yet even in CARASA, Schulman experienced some of the lingering effects of the complex relationship that existed between the women’s and the LGBT movements, dating back to the early 1970s. During the early days of gay liberation, lesbians had often



been misunderstood by the women's movement. American feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson contended that lesbianism was antithetical to the feminist agenda because it "involves role-playing and, more important, because it is based on the primary assumption of male oppression" (Echols, 1990, p. 212).

After inauspicious beginnings--including feminist icon Betty Friedan's fear of a "Lavender Menace"--the woman's movement gradually changed its tune (Jagose, 1996, p.45). Slogans such as "Sisterhood is Powerful" helped feminists link women's and gay liberation. Herein activists recognized that freedom to control one's own body and to live in human dignity and self-respect were key issues for both movements. The women's health movement emphasis on women's spaces, and self-education motto "Our Bodies, Our Selves" served as both a health slogan and as a call for self-determination that mobilized a generation of feminist, LGBT, and AIDS activists (Stoller, 1998).

Nevertheless, tensions between the camps remained, as reflected in Schulman's (2002) experience with CARASA:

CARASA was the radical wing of the reproductive rights movement. In those days, there was NARAL [National Abortion Rights Action League], which was single-issue abortion rights. [CARASA was] looking at birth control, childcare... that would allow a person to have some sort of autonomy. And these were a mixture of socialist feminists, the left wing of the feminist movement. Unfortunately the whole thing self-destructed in 1982 around homophobia. The lesbians in the group were increasingly out. Suddenly, we wanted to say "lesbian liberation" and talk about lesbian stuff in the context of reproductive rights and they just wouldn't do it. And it was very much old left arguments: "It will alienate

the working class; it will alienate Latinos. You are trying to turn this into a lesbian organization.” And we all got kicked out. And that was very upsetting and horrible. . . . I didn’t do anything for four years until I came into ACT UP. (pp.134-5)

The old obstacles of patriarchy, homophobia, and lefty rigidity were hard to shake. “Some of the things these groups had in common were an outdated concept of organizing, an unwillingness to reach outside their known constituencies, and a rigid set of politics around which everyone had to agree,” Maxine Wolfe (1990), another veteran of the reproductive rights struggles of the late 1970s explained in describing why she turned toward queer organizing with ACT UP in the following decade. “Then you couldn’t question anything or you were suspect” (pp. 234-5). Clearly, there were even women within the women’s movement who did not support prefigurative notions of sexual self determination and autonomy in all their forms. Throughout the 1980s, sex wars raged between rivaling camps as the movement split over the meanings of sexual expression, pornography, and sadomasochism (Jargose, 1996). Camps parted ways. On the one hand, a cohort of liberal leaning women continued down the road of professional reform, supporting a demobilized, straight, white movement. On the other, a cohort of women, many of color and many lesbians went on to support a range of movements around a wide range of issues. Many of these women took the lead in building a wide range of movements. They brought a distinct set of life experiences, including being social outsiders, into their organizing (Kauffman 2002). No doubt this helped provide insights about how to help others feel included, supported, and marginalized within their movements. The queer contribution to these efforts was recognition of the multiple axes

of oppression. Its focus remained on personal freedom, liberation from oppression, and a respect for the right to pleasure (Jargose, 1996). With these principles in mind, women such as Schulman and Wolfe helped create a vital new form of queer activism.

## THE AIDS COALITION TO UNLEASH POWER

With ACT UP in the 1980s and 1990s, Schulman plugged into one of the best organizing experiences of her life. The organizing skills she and other women such as Maxine Wolf brought from the women's movement were sorely lacking during ACT UP's earliest days. "They were people who had been in gay liberation politics. But that was not the mainstay" Schulman recounts (2002, pp.134-8). "The main people in ACT UP had been apolitical, totally apolitical. So when this thing [AIDS] happened they really didn't understand a lot about how to run a meeting, how to do things." On the other hand, "a lot of women had been trained in the feminist movement this whole time and had an incredible skill," Schulman explains. "So a lot of the women rose to a position of leadership because they had organizing skills" (pp.137-8).

They also had a very specific insight into the problem. Vitto Russo, an early member of ACT UP New York with experience in gay liberation organizing, noticed the influence of women in the group right away. He argues that part of why women were so effective in ACT UP was because of their experiences with the inequalities of the health care system. The AIDS crises exposed the glaring cracks that were already in this system. Activists who had dealt with institutional inadequacies around women's health care knew what they were up against (Elgear & Hutt, 1991).

For some two decades, ACT UP's approach worked very well--and still continues. Part of that success was attributable to the talent of so many people, and their

capacity to deal with tough policy minutiae and political differences in an open way. Another aspect was the quality of prefigurative community building--of creating the world in which one wants to live as part of the organizing process, and embodying this vision. Such an ambition found within the groups' very focus on an affinity model. "Many of the friendships within the affinity groups allowed the groups to work." explained New York harm reduction activist and ACT UP veteran Donald Grove (personal communication, 2008). The non-hierarchical nature of these affinity groupings of caring friends who were invested in each other helped the groups achieve both short- and long-term goals simultaneously. The point of these affinity groups was often to take care of each other. Sarah Schulman (2002) has famously noted the first goal of a lesbian activist is to get her friend a girlfriend.

For ACT UP, the intelligence, the meetings as theater, and the sense of play often prevented the ugly side from taking over. Ann Northrop, a Vassar graduate with experience in the women's and antiwar movements, brought these lessons into her work of facilitating the large early ACT UP meetings, which sometimes included four or five hundred people. She explained:

Well, certainly one of the reasons I felt myself comfortable in ACT UP, and at home, was that I felt that it was a room that--in spite of being so predominantly male--was very feminist oriented, and was one of the few rooms of men that I could imagine, let alone be in, where I could speak in feminist terms and principles. And that was a very important factor for me and I think for a number of other women in the room. Now there are also people who would say ultimately that didn't work. And there were wars between some of the men and the women

in the room. For a long time, I think it did work and there was a hunger among a lot of the men to learn that stuff. (personal communication, 2005)

“I stayed in ACT UP because it is a place where I can be a lesbian, a woman, and an activist” Maxine Wolf concurs (1990, p.235). She describes similar experiences as Northrop. Part of ACT UP was a curiosity. “I have seen men who wanted to hide being gay behind their AIDS activism do a teach-in on lesbian and gay history, become more and more openly gay, and develop a gay liberation, and not a gay rights perspective,” Wolfe notes, suggesting it was not a long step from awareness of the links between different movement histories toward an expanded political consciousness. “I have seen the issues expand--a year ago no one was talking about nationalized health care” (p.235).

The issues most certainly did expand as AIDS activism exposed multiple levels of race, gender, and class based discrimination that fueled the carnage. As this activism overlapped with a global justice movement, AIDS activists looked across borders to a new set of challenges. Building on their experiences with ACT UP, a number of younger women, including Asia Russell, Julie Davids, and Sharon Ann Lynch helped create a well-connected and well-funded global AIDS movement (Davids, 2007). Part of the success of their work involved taking the lessons of praxis they learned in ACT UP as a theory of action. Schulman describes her applied theory of activism:

In a way, I’m an old-time lefty more than anything else and I’ve always been interested in political movements that have concrete political goals, that have issues for campaigns, that mobilize people, that create countercultures--that stuff has attracted me. . . e theory is not complex. You have to have an idea that is winnable. You have to have a campaign that is viable. And you have to follow

every step of it. It's quite easy. If your goal is not winnable then you are in trouble. And if you don't have an idea of how to reach [your goal], you'll never reach it. It sounds simple, but it's very hard to get people to follow it. (pp.135-6).

## PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS WITHIN THE GLOBAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

Given the assumption that the means of organizing should not be distinguished from the ends, prefigurative models owe a great deal to anarchism and the women's movement. Egalitarian and consensus-based direct democratic approaches to social change are basic cornerstones of this work (Epstein, 1991). This model of joyous resistance can be summed up in Gandhi's aphorism, "We must be the change we want to see in the world," which has so much been a part of the new organizing (Hudema, 2004).

For many of today's activists, this prefigurative approach is considered an imperative. "This is how it works: someone has a vision that arises from a fierce and passionate love. To make it real, we must love every moment of what we do." Starhawk (2002) writes, describing this model of protest: "Impermanent spirals embed themselves in asphalt, in concrete, in dust. Slowly, slowly, they eat into the foundations of the structures of power. Deep transformations take time. Regeneration from decay. *Si se puede!* It can be done."

Prefigurative community-building approaches have become increasingly popular. "Protests gain in power if they reflect the world we want to create," L. A. Kauffman (2004) elaborates. "And I, for one, want to create a world that is full of color and life and creativity and art and music and dance. It's a celebration of life against the forces of greed and death." Yet, more than this, such a form a protest advances the affirmative.

“It’s a way of protesting that gets out of the angry shouting shrill position that you can get put in when you’re just simply saying no. Having a carnival is a way of saying yes,” Kauffman finishes. One of the primary forms of such a mode of protest took shape in the street actions of the direct action group, Reclaim the Streets (RTS). “RTS reclaimed more than a style of protest--they popularized a model of political action wherein the protest itself is a living, breathing and in this case, dancing, political message,” activist Stephen Duncombe (2002) explains. He describes the application to RTS’ do-it-yourself politics: “By filling the streets with people freely expressing themselves, RTS not only protests what it is against, but also creates an experimental model of the culture it is for.”

In order to attempt to create a context in which the Baker Model can best merge within prefigurative ambitions, many in the global justice movement employ an affinity group structure designed to maximize egalitarian, direct democratic organizing. This model was revitalized during the late 1960s, before its recent renaissance. Lesley J. Wood and Kelly Moore (2002) explain that the model emphasizes “intentionally nonhierarchical organizing mechanisms which date back to radical feminist, civil rights, antiracist, environmental, and anarchist movements” (p.30). This approach is used to overcome negative aspects including sexism, racism, and machismo that often accompany the organizing process. To achieve this end, affinity groups are expected to be aware of their internal dynamics and the systems of power implicit in their interactions.

Despite these efforts, the same obstacles Baker contended with (patriarchy and male privilege) continue to be blind spots that hinder organizing efforts. Take Reclaim the Streets. The issue of male domination was a constant issue for the group. During the group’s peak years, women assumed positions of leadership, and actions thrived within

the emphasis on creative action. During low points, however, women were interrupted at meetings and felt marginalized and under-appreciated (Shepard, In Press).

Describing the meetings of the original English RTS, John Jordan (personal communication, 2005) notes, “It was never really thinking about the process. RTS meetings were the most macho, boring, dull, unembodied, unpleasurable experiences ever.” Many participants had similar experiences with RTS NYC. Amanda Hickman (personal communication, 2005) reflected on the irony of a group that aspired to create a better world, yet had difficulty overcoming interruptions and conflict during meetings: “Are we trying to build a better world or a more abusive world, ’cause the abusive one already exists out there. We don’t need to replicate it here.”

“If you can’t even play with each other, how are you gonna play with the world?” asks Kate Crane (personal communication, 2005), who also worked with the group. “I stopped going to meetings.” She explains: “There were a handful of people whom I wanted to throttle every time they opened their mouths. And it wasn’t fun for me and it made me angry.”

The phenomenon was hardly unique to RTS. At its height, the North American global justice movement occasionally mirrored the power structures it sought to challenge. For organizer L. A. Kauffman (2004), the 2001 Quebec City Free Trade of the Americas protests represented “the apex of that tactical radicalization.” While the police acted violently against the protests, Kauffman was also concerned with the dynamics within the movement. “I had a big problem with the aesthetics of the Quebec City protest, and with the aesthetic drift of the global justice movement more generally. Our side was becoming more and more militaristic,” she explained. “All those people--mainly, but not



exclusively, young men--dressed in black, looking all menacing and ominous, getting off on confrontations.” The movement seemed to be mirroring what it was fighting--militarism and violence. “And the spirit of carnival that had been so striking in Seattle, that sense of a carnival of resistance, was getting lost.”

In following years, dynamics continued to present a complicated issue for the movement. During the spokescouncils preceding the Republican National Convention protests in the summer of 2004, many women experienced a pattern of male domination of the meetings. In order to address these issues, male and female facilitators not only discussed the problem within the meetings, but with the letter titled, “Movement Dynamics” posted to the Direct Action Network list-serve (Marina, 2004). It stated: “We are saddened. . . by how some in the global justice movement are treating others in the movement. . . in spokescouncils. We are all the more disturbed that most of those who have been attacked, for apparently political reasons, are women.” The authors noted that sometimes such behavior is the work of provocateurs, while at other times it is lack of thought among participants. Yet, “The most important thing is to deal with this as a movement and treat one another with openness and respect.” The authors asked that everyone actively think “. . . of strategies, tactics, and structures that make the world we want possible. . . .” It concluded with a call for organizers to act on the movement’s prefigurative ambitions. “Many of us in the movement believe that what we do now and how we relate to one another is the world we want to create, believing the future is created in the present.”

To address these shortfalls, a number of men involved within the contemporary global justice movement have sought to create strategies by which men can contribute to

activism without replicating systems of domination. For example, San Francisco community organizer Chris Crass (2002) has created a series of tips for activists called, "Tools for White Guys who are Working for Social Change (and other people socialized in a society based on domination." The list outlines practical steps almost anyone involved in community practice can utilize to make meetings more effective. The first five steps are listed below:

1. Practice noticing who's in the room at meetings--how many men, how many women, how many white people, how many people of color, is it majority heterosexual, are there out queers, what are people's class backgrounds. Don't assume to know people, but also work at being more aware.
- 2a. Count how many times you speak and keep track of how long you speak.
- 2b. Count how many times other people speak and keep track of how long. . . .
3. Be conscious of how often you are actively listening to what other people are saying as opposed to just waiting your turn or thinking about what you'll say next.
4. Practice going to meetings focused on listening and learning; go to some meetings and do not speak at all.
- 5a. Count how many times you put ideas out to the group.
- 5b. Count how many times you support other people's ideas for the group.

With these points in mind, activists are expected to check themselves and their own biases. Today, a new cohort of men has actually sought to grapple with male privilege, while taking action to change imbalances of power (Tirrant, 2007). The difference between groups in which this consciousness becomes part of the organizing, and those in which it does not can be profound. When it happens, organizing can become

a dynamic process in which people and groups grow together. Activists access their own potential as organizers to achieve what those in power would hope citizens would not believe possible: self-organization in action. This philosophy assumes that leadership is a quality everyone has inside herself, and emphasizes a strategy of self-emancipation in which people are liberated from the need for liberators.

While activists tend to assume that how the movement organizes itself is as important as the results, but it is certainly not simple. Hundreds of activists poured into spokescouncil meetings to plan the day of direct action on August 31, during the 2004 Republican National Convention (RNC) in New York City. More than 1000 people were arrested, and the actions garnered a great deal of media attention (see Shepard, in press). Simultaneously, a small and highly effective affinity group from ACT UP was able to garner as much, if not more, sustained media attention to their carefully tailored message through a series of creative actions, including a naked protest outside the convention center. Affinity groups made up of a small number of activists are typically more efficient, and often just as effective, as large numbers. Within well coordinated affinity groups, the realization of Schulman's conception of the linkage between aim, tactic, and outcome often finds its best expression.

At its best, ACT UP's working groups linked their urgent needs for results within a pragmatic organizing approach that emphasized both outcomes and process. The point was to achieve results. Satisfaction was found on multiple levels. People came to meetings because they enjoyed the social mix, the play, the flirting, the social eros, and the environment of engagement in issues in which queer men and women were working together to have a discernable impact (Shepard, in press). ACT UP's holistic organizing

model, which began with naming a target and policy goal; doing its research; finding a weak point in a policy food chain in which to go after it; and using media, protest and political performance, including acts of civil disobedience, to carry its message aimed at impacting this target. For the last two decades, it has remained effective. Here, process and outcomes linked synergistically. Yet process was not prioritized over outcomes.

The issues of internal process versus external goals involve core questions about effective organizing. Queer organizing veteran Cindra Feuer (personal communication, 2005) helped coordinate the media for the naked action. She discussed how much the process mattered in organizing to create change. “Often I find that when you are working really well together, it doesn’t matter who’s calling the shots and it’s usually an organic process.” In such moments, Feuer explains, “I find that actions go really well when there is not too much concern for process. Like when you pay too much concern to the process and how the decisions get made, shit doesn’t get done and people get upset. Feelings get hurt.” And the emphasis on process can actually backfire. “I’ve worked in situations where I realized decisions were getting made by one person. And I just bite my tongue and I remember, the bigger picture is we want to get this done. We want this action to happen.” The emphasis is on the goal, “I don’t care about the process as much as I do about the end product.”

Answering the question, “Are you fighting to build community or create external changes? And are these aims mutually exclusive?” Starhawk (2005) explained: “I think it depends. Ideally it’s one and the same. In civil disobedience, there are two things: opposing and building. One side is stopping what you don’t want from happening, and the other is building what you do want.” The point of the multi-issue organizing is to

merge process and outcome to emphasize the affirmative, to build the world in which activists want to live.

## CREATING A NEW MULTI-ISSUE POLITICS

Strategies of action are critically important, and while the prefigurative model is taken as a guiding philosophy of organizing, no model can or should remain static. Movement organizing repertoires continue to evolve with the issues. Such a project depends on a critical praxis in which activist theory is critically outlined and practiced. Fortunately, new cohorts of social actors are standing up to take on this challenge.

Take the work of trans activist Dean Spade. “[T]he connections between opposition to the consolidation of global capital and domestic queer and trans activism remain under discussed,” Spade writes (p. 34). Yet, rather than just talk about this, Spade has helped create a legal clinic, named after trans icon Sylvia Rivera, for trans people currently facing hostile conditions in the streets of New York. Rather than create an identity-based model, Spade helped create a model for services based the imperatives of lived experience, in all its complexities. Such a project involves recognizing that many people occupy complicated social identities informed by race, education, culture, gender, class position, and immigration status. “What I would like to see most is trans activism and trans analysis that reflects the most urgent issues in trans life and that creates dynamic responses and ideas that move us to think in new ways,” Spade (2006) writes, alluding to the prefigurative ambitions of the social movements which inform both his work, “and the alliances we’re building to create the world we want to live in,” (pp.32-3).

At the end of the day, Spade’s work is informed by countless social movements, including feminism and queer activism, with its roots in the liberation of sexuality and

pleasure. “I do not find it a stretch to see how interrogating the limits of monogamy fits into the queer, trans, feminist, anticapitalist, anti-oppression politics that most of my personal work and political practice is focused on,” Spade (2006) recently wrote in an essay for a volume entitled, *We don’t need another wave; dispatches from the next generation of feminists* (p. 29). “[O]wning sexual pleasure and being allowed to seek it out is a radical act for everyone in our shame filled culture,” Spade continues, making reference to the controversies and contributions of radical pro-sex feminists (p. 34). Much of this process is about shaking off imposed identities and striking a course that recognizes the complexities of people’s lives and needs. “We’ve done difficult things before,” Spade notes. “We’ve struggled with internalized oppressions, we’ve chosen to live our lives ways that our families often tell us are impossible, idealistic, or dangerous, and we get joy from creatively resisting the limits of our culture and political system,” Spade concludes; they are, “both external and part of our minds” (p. 38).

A new generation is taking the lead in creating a different kind of social justice politics based on a multi-issue agenda, rather than a politics of identity and inclusion. As Spade’s writing suggests, this is a politics in constant flux. Trans activism is now transforming the activist landscape. One is less likely to see “women-only” spaces, or single sex caucuses at meetings or conferences. People seem reluctant to put themselves a box. Instead, younger activists strive to connect linkages between issues and struggles.

Recognizing, for example, that issues of violence against women cannot be separated from struggles against the prison industrial complex and police brutality, a new cohort of women is charting an activist course based on a broad human rights framework. “The focus on building autonomous power does not imply separatism,” Andrea Smith

(2006), of INCITE!, explains. “In fact, this model of radical women of color organizing is not simply based on a narrow politics of identity but more on a set of political practices designed to eliminate the interlocking systems of oppression.” For Smith, the struggle against “heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism” is aimed at “liberating. . . all peoples. Unlike the demobilizing reformism of the mainstream women’s movement, this organizing is about asserting power and taking responsibility for transforming the world” (p. 69). It is a goal to which many can contribute.

From Jane Addams to Ella Baker to Starhawk and Ann Northrop, women have helped reinvent movement organizing. Their legacy can be seen in movements from civil rights to global justice, trade unionism, and AIDS activism. The principle of an egalitarian mode of engagement understood as prefigurative community organizing has become a vital tool for movements for social change. Process counts, but so does outcome. In its best form, a democratic organizing process is linked with a substantive critique, as well as an effective mobilizing strategy combining research, communication, and a sense of possibility. Through the examples explored, feminists have taken the lead in multi-issue organizing campaigns and change has followed. What emerges in these stories is a new organizing praxis. It’s only just beginning.

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